

I Am . . . Not

In this tongue-in-cheek parody, writer Karen Brown plays with “rules” for her writing classroom.

KAREN BROWN

In the beginning there were desks, clean and pure, and the room was quiet. And it was good. On the second day, the garden of knowledge was filled with voices and minds, and I perceived that guidelines and rules must be formed to regulate thy writing, which must be written for thy portfolio. Here, then are the rules. Place them in thine hearts.

Concerning the scoring traits—those of importance and those of less—these are the guides. Of voice, though I may sayeth that it is important to me, even of the utmost importance, and lo, even the State of Oregon may so sayeth, it is not important enough to matter on the score of thy paper, for the state thinketh that it canst not prove in court a score for voice. This should bring joy to thy soul, for thy voice neither praises nor laments, but is flat like the very desert. In like ways, word choice is important but does not matter. Thou shalt be glad because thy words are “cool” and “neat” and “nice,” which are abominations unto me.

Concerning the more important traits of ideas and content and organization, thy paper shall have some of each. A strong beginning, an ending of true meaning and worth, and details that are full of imagery and indeed fit where placed are glorious unto mine eyes. Of sentence fluency, thy sentences shall flow like the river. They shall not all begin with the same word and shall be of differing lengths.

Concerning conventions, they are a stumbling block placed before you. Lo! Even so, convention scores are important enough to be doubled in my sight and in also the sight of the State of Oregon.

- The words thou usest shall be spelled correctly and handwritten with precision in such a way that *t*'s are indeed crossed and *i*'s dotted with dots and not circles (nor flowers, nor hearts), and that *o*'s will not be confused with *a*'s in my sight. How old must thou be before thou canst discern the differences between *where* and *were*; between the spellings of *there*—of which there are three—each unique and special in mine sight?
- Thy questions, they are to end with the mark thereof.
- Thy sentences, they shall be whole and complete, lacking neither subject nor predicate, and will end with a dot of which thou shalt be familiar and also with the name thereof.
- Commas shalt not be used like unto pepper from a shaker but rather like finely placed jewels in a crown.

- Those things that thou callest floating commas, there are only two reasons for their use: either to replace a missing letter or to show ownership. These are the reasons to use that which I callest an apostrophe. That which thou callest the double floating comma—quotation marks—are placed around that which is said or thought and titles, and nowhere else.
- Paragraphs begin with an indentation; the space thereof is holy unto me. But only a two-finger space is holy—never unto half of the line.

The paper whereon thy work is written shall be white and pure. It shall not be ripped, nor torn, nor wrinkled as an old raiment—even as thy jeans. It shall be placed so that the holes are on the left even as I have told thee unto the hundredth time. The lacy, littering fringe off the spiral notebook is an abomination unto me, even so I shall accept it if it is on the left, even as I have said before.

Behold, though I have much knowledge, I cannot discern thee by the writing of thine hand, thus place thine own name at the top of the page that I may knowest to whom the paper belongs, and it shall not come to litter the floor, yea, even the floor of the classroom. Thou shalt also place the date of the day and the month and the year at the top of final copies, and the mode thereof. A title is a glorious thing in my sight.

Concerning the ink that thou mayest use in my sight, behold, black and blue are of legal quality and are the finest to use. Of pencils, mechanical hold a sharp point even unto the end. Of ink that is glittery or milky, or does smudge, or change color, or must be held to the light in a certain way to be read—these must not be used. Yea, keep them only in the packs thou carriest.

Do not use my Wite-Out, for this is the greatest command; it is a sore and horrible sin against me and even unto the space in which I dwell. Rather, goest to the woman down the hall, even unto the woman pickier than I, and partake of her Wite-Out.

These, then, are the laws that shall guide thee in the garden that thou callest Room 94. And though I am the almighty power here, and though thou must obey the commands, and though thou art in constant awe of me, thou mayest call me Ms. Brown.

KAREN BROWN teaches eighth grade language arts at Columbia Middle School in Irrigon, Oregon. She is affiliated with the Oregon Writing Project at Eastern Oregon University.